

Tetanus

(Lockjaw)

Disease Fact Sheet Series

What is tetanus?

Tetanus, often referred to as "lockjaw", is caused by bacteria that produces a toxin (poison) in the body that attacks the nervous system.

Where are the bacteria found?

Usually in soil, manure and dust.

How does a person get tetanus?

The bacteria can enter the body through a puncture wound, a cut in the skin, a severe burn or an animal bite. An injury from a rusty nail is often blamed for tetanus. However, it is the bacteria on the nail, not the rust, that causes the disease.

How often does tetanus occur?

In Wisconsin, about one or two cases are reported each year.

Can tetanus be spread from person to person?

No. People get tetanus from the environment and not from other people.

Who gets tetanus?

Tetanus can occur in persons of all ages who have not been immunized against it.

How soon do symptoms appear after exposure?

Signs and symptoms occur from 3 to 21 days (usually about 8 days) after the infection with the bacteria.

What are the signs and symptoms of tetanus?

The signs and symptoms include a headache, temperature, crankiness, and spasms of the jaw muscles. This is followed by intense, painful muscle contractions in the neck, arms, legs, and stomach. Muscle spasms occur frequently and last for several minutes.

How is tetanus confirmed?

By clinical signs and symptoms, there is no laboratory test for tetanus.
(Over)

What are the complications associated with tetanus?

Tetanus is a painful disease that may lead to breathing problems or contractions strong enough to break bones. Three out of ten people who get tetanus die from it.

Is there a treatment for tetanus?

In the rare event of actual tetanus disease, there is specific treatment that involves the use of tetanus immune globulin (TIG), appropriate antibiotics, wound management, sedation, Td vaccination and other measures

Can tetanus be prevented?

Yes. Tetanus vaccine, (usually given in combination with diphtheria and acellular pertussis vaccines and called DTaP vaccine), is recommended for all infants and children. Doses of vaccine are recommended at the following ages: 2 months, 4 months, 6 months, 15-18 months and 4-6 years. Thereafter, a booster dose of combined tetanus diphtheria vaccine (called Td vaccine) is recommended every 10 years.